

# Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present, non-judgmentally, while being aware of your present thoughts and emotions through your senses and paying attention to your conscious intentions. It reduces reactivity and feelings of overwhelm. Research in the past decade or so has found that mindfulness is proving to be not only a psychological salve, but also has many positive effects on your physical health and wellbeing. It is a superpower. All you have to do is practice quiet awareness, and bring yourself back to the present, despite where your wandering mind may wish to take you. Simple, but not easy. And you need to practice it daily to reap the plethora of advantages it has to offer for your recovery.

There are three key principles:

- To be in the present moment.
- To be non-judgmental.
- To be intentional (and we like to add that your intentions must be gentle and kind — to yourself, and to all living beings in the rest of your world).

With society as busy and fast-moving as it is nowadays, our chances of being mindful as a natural process become almost non-existent. That's why we have to practice frequently and regularly to become skilled and be reminded of its importance to our health and wellbeing. The process of neuroplasticity means you can train your brain to change its very cellular composition! True story. Science says so. Neat, huh?

## The science of mindfulness

Neuroscience tells us that we can do a few simple things each day to change our brain chemistry and neural pathways. Simply put, you can change your habitual ways of reacting to the world for the better. You can teach your brain how to settle down and change the way you think, feel and respond to situations. It's one of the most incredible scientific discoveries of the 20th and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Prior to the discovery of neuroplasticity, science and medicine believed that we were doomed to live our lives with any brain damage that had accumulated through prolonged stress, addiction, or trauma. Today we know very differently, and it is cause for great celebration.

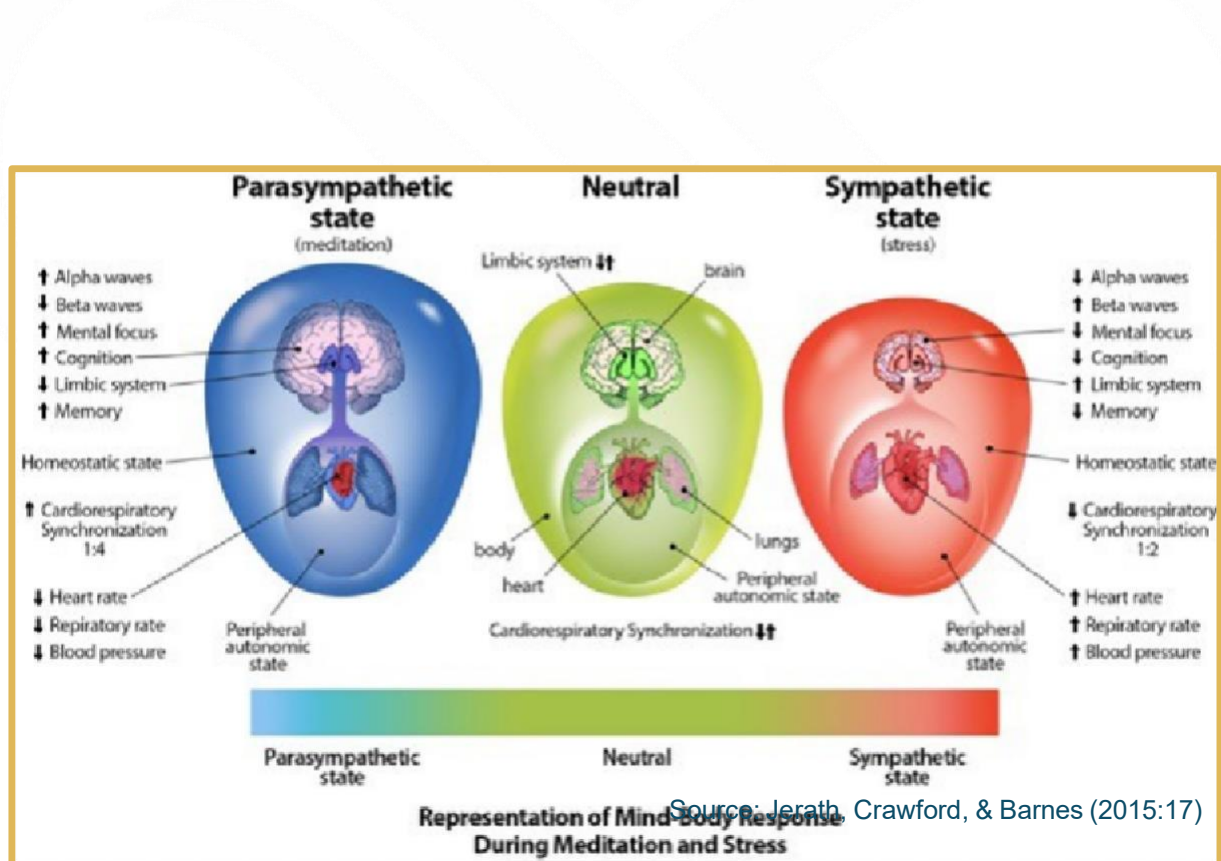
Figure 1 (below) depicts the brain in three states: the neutral or idling brain (the central green brain), the sympathetic or stressed state (the red brain to the right) and the parasympathetic or meditating state (the blue brain on the left).

The sympathetic state is when the sympathetic nervous system initiates the “fight-flight-freeze” response to anxiety, anger, panic or any other fearful state. This causes body reactions such as an increased heart rate, increased or shallow breathing, and rising blood pressure.

As part of the survival strategies of the mind and body, when the sympathetic nervous system is aroused like this, the rational thinking part of the brain (a section of the cortex or outer covering of the brain) shuts down, so that much needed resources to fuel the fight-flight-freeze mechanism can be garnished, causing memory and concentration issues. You may recognize heightened moments in your life where you ‘can’t think straight’. This is why. You are in survival mode at these times. We examine the fight-flight-freeze mechanism more closely throughout the program. It is generally agreed that this state is uncomfortable, and it is often this state of stress that can lead you to want relief through your drug. That’s why we strongly urge you to learn natural ways to bring yourself out of this state in the future.

The blue brain to the left illustrates the parasympathetic state where the calmed response emanates. It has the opposite effect to the agitated sympathetic state. We like to think of it as the parachute that can slow down the panicked, fearful sympathetic system. When this response is elicited in the body through mindfulness or meditation techniques, typically your heart rate will go down, as do your blood pressure and breathing rate, increasing oxygen to the brain. This, along with the limbic system being sent messages of calm from the body, brings the pre-frontal cortex of the brain back on-line, which restores your ability to focus, remember things and generally think straight again. You also feel better in the body as it is no longer reacting instinctively as if in mortal danger.

**Figure 1: Representation of the mind-body response during meditation and stress**



Anyone can do mindfulness practice. There are no barriers. It doesn’t matter how old you are or what your physical ability is. Mindfulness is not religious or exotic. We all already have the capacity to be present, and it doesn’t require us to change who we

are. We can cultivate these qualities with simple practices that have been scientifically proven to benefit us in many ways.

### **Why do I need to practice mindfulness?**

Simply put, you have most likely been using your drug to cope with your life, to relieve uncomfortable feelings and/or to feel good. Unless you find easy and natural ways to bring yourself into a place of calm, rational, ease and comfort, you are likely to relapse. Or you may be unhappy, anxious and discontented with your life even if you don't use again.

Mindfulness is one of the most effective tools to reduce uncomfortable feelings and increase your sense of peace, calm and comfort in the world, making it easier to stay off your drug and have a wonderful, rich life. That's why. Do you want it?

### **How do I practise mindfulness and meditation?**

Mindfulness is available to us at every moment, whether through meditation and body scan techniques, mindful practices like taking time to pause and breathe when the phone rings, instead of rushing to answer it, or reminding yourself to do only one thing at a time as you go about your day.

Your mind is like a puppy, or toddler, especially when you are first learning to stay focused on breathing, or a point of awareness. When the puppy wanders away from a training session, we gently pick her up, take her back to the centre and give her the command again. There is no judgement of good or bad involved in this – it is simply what puppies do. You also need to be non-judgemental and gentle with your mind. When your awareness wanders and your thoughts and stories distract you, gently bring your attention back to breathing in and breathing out, or the sensations in your body.

Some of you will have already heard of and might have practised mindfulness before. You may even be practising mindfulness in your life now. If that's so, you will be a great resource for others in your life that may wish to try it. And we believe you can never have too much mindfulness.

### **The basics of mindfulness practice**

Mindfulness helps us to change or moderate our conditioned responses (or reactions to life) by creating a gap between our thoughts and/or feelings and our habitual reactions. Here's one way to tune into mindfulness throughout the day (adapted from [mindful.org](http://mindful.org)):

- Set aside some time. You don't need a meditation cushion or any special equipment to access your mindfulness skills – but you do need to set aside a specific time and space to do so in the beginning. When you become more skilled, you can become mindful anywhere anytime.
- Observe the present moment as it is. The aim of mindfulness is not to quieten the mind or attempt to achieve a state of eternal calm. The goal is simple: you're aiming to pay attention to the present moment, without judgement. Easier said than done, we know.

- Let your judgements roll by. Judgments can be negative OR positive. It's natural to think that only negative judgments are problematic. It is best to note ALL judgments objectively and let them ALL roll on by.
- Return to noticing the present moment as it is. Your mind can often get carried away in thought. Bring it back, over, and over. This is mindfulness.
- Be kind to your wandering mind. Be gentle as you quietly bring your thoughts back to the present moment through your senses, or your breath.

Source: <https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/>

Results will accumulate over time if you keep practicing mindfulness. It's like magic, and if it's practised regularly and correctly, it can be a game-changer for your life.

Spiritual leaders such as Eckhart Tolle posit that being present is *easier* than not being present! Once we know how to be present and practise it regularly, it becomes much simpler. Olympians have a natural talent for their craft, but they don't just say they want to be good at their sport and sit around waiting to become Olympians. They have to work at it daily for months and years. Practising daily is essential for becoming skilled at anything. And so it is with mindfulness.

### **Setting intentions**

Once you have accomplished a measure of orientation to the present moment, you may begin to practice being intentional., What this means is that you can begin to set intentions from your mindful, present, non-judgemental self.

Intentions could include:

- "Today I intend to remain abstinent from my drug".
- "Today I intend to be happy about my abstinence".
- "Today I intend to love myself".
- "Today I intend to live honestly".
- "Today I intend to be kind and loving toward all".

There is a plethora of scientific research that supports the notion of conscious intention manifesting material outcomes in your life. Try it!

Remember, mindfulness is best practised as a lifelong habit. You won't regret it and it will help with relapse prevention, because the aim of the game is to be comfortable in your own skin and divert attention from your rambling addict mind. We heartily recommend trying it for a while. You may find it works!

## Recommended Videos

*TED Talk: The Power of Mindfulness: What You Practise Grows Stronger* | Dr Shauna Shapiro.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leblJdB2-Vo> (13:45mins)

*How is Mindfulness Used in Treatment and Recovery From Addiction?*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-ljKqFsseA> (11:11 mins)

*Mind Over Matter in Treating Substance Addiction (animated video).*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4GJmxwHhP0> (4:48)

*Mindfulness and Addiction Recovery: How Mindful Living Helps Prevent Relapse* | Stacey Aldridge LCSW

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxeY-nB9oqw> (16:13 mins)

*TED Talk: Mindfulness: Defeating Distraction and Amplifying Awareness* | Richard Chambers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QjI8nMiwJw> (12:53 mins)

*TED Talk: All it Takes is 10 Mindful Minutes* | Andy Puddicombe.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzR62JJCMBQ> (9:24 mins)

*TED Talk: How Mindfulness Transforms Us* | Jo Pang.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gi2ER4pSaU> (13:32mins)

*TED Talk: Self-transformation Through Mindfulness* | Dr David Vago.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nP5oedmzkM> (19:34mins)

## References

Jerath R, Crawford MW and Barnes VA (2015) A unified 3D default space consciousness model combining neurological and physiological processes that underlie conscious experience. *Front. Psychol.* 6:1204. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01204

Tolle, Eckhart (2004) *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Vancouver, B.C.: Novato, Calif.: Namaste Pub

## Reflective Questions: Mindfulness

1. What is something you can do well that you have had to practice so you could develop the skill?

2. Have you ever practiced mindfulness before? If so, do you practice it daily? If so, why? If not, why not? Do you feel it works to help you feel happier in your life? If not, why not?

3. Do you believe what the neuroscientists say about your ability to change the way you think, respond and feel, through mindfulness? Describe how you feel about that.

4. Do you think you could try to practise a mindfulness technique daily for the next three weeks? If not, why not?

5. Were you able to do what Dr Shapiro described as her practice in the video in this module “*The Power of Mindfulness: What you practice grows stronger*”? If so, how did it feel? If not, why not? Do you think you could try to do it? Every day? Any day?

6. Try to keep track of, and list here, the number of times you have opinions about anything for the next 24 hours. If you are participating in the Miracles@Home group programs, bring this information to your next group session. If you are doing the Evergreen programs, share this information with someone you trust and can have a good laugh with. It can be interesting and somewhat hilarious to see how many opinions or judgements our minds can squeeze into a short period. Give it go. It can be fun and increases your awareness, which is *always* a good thing.

Bringing your mind’s judgements into conscious awareness is a good start to changing the energy-sapping, mind**LESS** subconscious activity of meaningless and futile opinions and judgements.

